

Broadcast— The Invasion

TRIB D DEC 9 - 1948

By JOHN CROSBY

The most famous—or maybe infamous—is the word I'm looking for—broadcast of all time opened with a precise, fussy and extraordinary dull weather report. "For the next 24 hours not much change in temperature . . . Maximum temperature 68, minimum 48 . . . We take you now to the Meridan room in the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York where you will be entertained by the music of Ramon Raquello and his orchestra.

There followed an interval of dance music, then there was a long and dull interview with a professor at the Princeton Observatory over a meteor which had fallen in New Jersey. More dance music. There were a few news bulletins about the meteor and then an on-the-spot description of the meteor by a radio reporter named Carl Phillips at the scene where it fell, Grovers Mill, near Newark.

Suddenly the coppery cylinder opened "revealing the leathery tentacles and the terrible pale-eyed faces of the Martians within." Phillips began to splutter incoherently, for long moments he was entirely speechless, he spluttered some more, and within a matter of seconds, lay dead over his microphone, the first victim of the Martian ray.

ETERNITY OF WAITING

"There followed a moment of absolute silence—an eternity of waiting. Then, without warning, the network's emergency fill-in was heard—somewhere in a quiet studio a piano playing 'Clair de Lune,' soft and sweet as honey for many seconds, while the fate of the universe hung in the balance. Finally it was interrupted by the manly reassuring voice of Brig. Gen. Montgomery Smith, commander of the New Jersey State Militia, speaking from Trenton and placing the counties of Mercer and Middlesex as far west as Princeton and east to Jamesburg under martial law.

"Soon after that came an eyewitness account of the fatal battle of Watchung Hills, and then once again the lone piano was heard—now a symbol of terror, shattering the dead air with its nervous tinkle. As it played on and on, its effect became increasingly sinister—a thin band of suspense stretched almost beyond endurance."

New Jersey was destroyed and the Martians, tall as skyscrapers, headed for New York. The Secretary of State came on the air pleading for calm among the populace and promising that all measures were being taken to repel the invader. But the invaders came right on anyway, wading the Hudson, and blanketing New York City with gas.

OPEN MIKE CATCHES SOUNDS

The last announcer choked to death on the roof of the broadcast-ing house and his open mike caught only the whistling of ships in the harbor trying to escape. Then this noise died too. Finally, there was no sound at all, except that of a lone amateur radio ham trying desperately to find some one to talk to:

"2X2L calling CQ 2X2L calling CQ 2X2L calling CQ."

"Isn't there any one on the air?"

"Isn't there any one?"

A few moments later an announcer came on the air announcing that the program was an Orson Welles production of H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds." The program was only half over, but no one heard the last half of it. The panic was on.

TOLD IN HARPER'S

The history of the Martian invasion has been beautifully told in the December issue of "Harper's" Magazine by John Houseman in an article from which the above quotes were taken. Houseman, co-founder with Welles of the Mercury Theater, explains convincingly why the improbable radio drama was taken seriously by millions of people. Most psychologists have attributed it to the jittery time—Munich was only 35 days away—but Houseman gives the main credit to Welles' artistry in radio.

Houseman gives a wealth of background detail about this weird program and its consequences. The oddest revelation of all was the fact that "War of the Worlds" aroused no enthusiasm from any one, including Welles, and came close to being discarded in favor of some other work. Every one involved thought it was much too dull for a radio program.

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Wells Incensed

At Change in Story

TRIP D OCT 31 1938

LONDON, Oct. 31.—(U.P.)—H. G. Wells, author of "The War of the Worlds," said today that in selling the rights for broadcast of his novel he gave no permission for such alterations as led many American listeners to believe the United States actually was being attacked by Martians.

"I sold the rights for broadcast of the novel to Columbia Broadcasting Company but it was implicit in the agreement that it was to be used as fiction and not news," Wells said. "I gave no permission whatever for alterations that might lead to belief that it was real news."

Orson Welles Here; Defends Mars Story

Orson Welles, who threw the country into near-hysteria with his broadcast of a mythical invasion by the men from Mars, is not so sure that the event might not yet take place.

"It's no more fantastic than the war that is now going on in Europe," he said today after arriving here by air from Hollywood. "If modern man can find no better method of settling his differences than the use of mass murder, anything can happen."

Welles, who despite his 25 years as a veteran of the stage and radio, has been in Hollywood arranging details for his first moving picture, which he will write, direct and act.

"Right now I am hurrying back to New York to resume work with the Mercury Theater," he said.

He left this afternoon for the East by air.

U.S. DROPS 'PANIC' BROADCAST CASE

WASHINGTON, Dec. 5.—(AP)—The Communications Commission has decided to take no action on complaints that the Orson Welles broadcast of October 30 caused many radio listeners to believe men from Mars were invading the United States.

The commission said today it believed steps taken by the Columbia Broadcasting Company were sufficient to protect the public interest.

"While it is regrettable that the broadcast alarmed a substantial number of people," the FCC said, "there appeared to be no likelihood of a repetition of the incident and no occasion for action by the commission."

W. B. Lewis, vice-president of Columbia, had expressed regret for the incident and said the technique employed in it would not be used again. This arrangement included the interpolation of what purported to be "news announcements" in a musical program.

U.S. Probes Radio Drama, Terror Cause

TRIB D OCT 31 1938

Senator Plans Move To Curb Broadcasts, After Wild Scenes

WASHINGTON, Oct. 31. — (AP) — The Federal Communications Commission began an investigation to-day of a dramatic radio broadcast which led some people to believe last night that men from Mars had attacked the United States.

Chairman Frank P. McNinch asked the Columbia Broadcasting System to furnish the commission with an electrical transcription of the broadcast, a dramatized version of H. G. Wells' imaginative story, "War of the Worlds." McNinch said:

"Any broadcast that creates such general panic as this one is reported to have done is, to say the least, regrettable."

Thousands believed the drama to be authentic news reports.

McNinch added:

"The widespread public reaction to this broadcast, as indicated by the press, is another demonstration of the power and force of radio and points out again the serious public responsibility of those who are licensed to operate stations."

THOUSANDS FLEE

Explanatory announcements during the program, between 5 and 6 p.m. (P.S.T.) were overlooked.

Demands for an investigation multiplied in the wake of the broadcast.

Senator Clyde L. Herring (D., Ia.), said he planned to introduce in Congress a bill "controlling just such abuses as was heard over the radio last night. . . . Radio has no more right to present programs like that than someone has in knocking on your door and screaming," he added.

Some apartment houses in New York were emptied hurriedly by frantic listeners and by second and third hand accounts that multiplied the peril.

TRIES SUICIDE

A woman in Pittsburgh tried suicide, saying "I'd rather die this way than like that."

At a high point in the program, electric power failed at Concrete, Wash., a town of 1000, and the lights went out in most of the homes. Women fainted and men prepared to take their families to the mountains.

Switchboards in newspaper offices and police stations everywhere were swamped with calls from terrified people.

Some reported they could smell the gas and see the flames started by the attackers.

People gathered in groups to pray for salvation.

Many jumped into their automobiles and headed for the open spaces.

Church services here and elsewhere were broken up by intruders who screamed the world was coming to an end.

HIGHLY DRAMATIZED

Wells' fantasy was further dramatized and enacted by Orson Welles, Broadway actor, who Americanized the locale.

Four times during the program, C.B.S. pointed out, the announcer stressed that the story was fiction.

This reiteration either escaped many of those who tuned in for the full program or was lost entirely to late tuners-in, for it failed to prevent a hysteria unknown to the United States since the World War.

In a statement expressing "deep regret," Welles said:

"Far from expecting the radio audience to take the program as fact rather than a fictional presentation, we feared that the classic H. G. Wells story, which has served as inspiration for so many moving pictures, radio serials and even comic strips, might appear too old-fashioned for modern consumption.

"We can only suppose that the special nature of radio, which is often heard in fragments, or in parts disconnected from the whole, has led to this misunderstanding," the actor-dramatist added.

'EXPLOSIONS' REPORTED

Last night's Mercury Theater of the Air program started out in routine fashion. Then, suddenly—"we interrupt our program of dance music to bring you a special bulletin. Professor Farrel of Mt. Jennings Observatory, Chicago, reports

Thousands Fail to Hear Explanation of Radio Drama; Senator to Seek Law Curb

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several explosions of incandescent gas occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars."

This was the buildup for a dramatization that eventually had the Martians landing in meteor cars in New Jersey. . . . A 30-second pause for studio music. . . . Then the octopus-like Martians using the dread "heat-ray" and then, by telephone from the scene, the report of 40 persons dead there. . . . The Martians eventually succumbed to germs to which earth folk are immune.

Columbia declared afterward it had no intention of misleading listeners "and when it became evident that part of the audience had been disturbed by the performance, five announcements were made over the network later in the evening to reassure those listeners."

METAL TUBE

A moment after the build-up announcement of gas explosions on Mars, the scene of the fantasy switched to Princeton, where an astronomer undertook to "explain" the phenomena.

Another meteor "struck" at nearby Grover's mill to interrupt the professor, who rushed out with the announcer to investigate.

It was a giant tube of metal, they reported.

"Just a minute," the announcer called. "Something's happening! Ladies and gentlemen, this is terrific!

"The end of the thing is beginning to come off. The top is beginning to rotate like a screw! The thing must be hollow."

There was a clanking sound of falling metal. The "monsters" began crawling out. . . . Their "fire-arms" proved to be death ray machines. . . . Two hundred spectators died instantly. "The Governor of New Jersey" declared martial law.

Through the drone of airplane motors came radio reports of Army plots to headquarters:

"One machine partly crippled. Believed hit by a shell from an Army gun. . . . A heavy black fog—of extreme density, nature unknown. . . . Objective is New York City. . . . We're ready to attack. . . . They're closer. . . . There they go. . . . A giant arm is raised. . . . They're spraying us with flame."

An "operator" cut in: "Poisonous black smoke from the Jersey marshes. . . . Gas masks useless. . . .

Urge population to move into open spaces."

"The bells you hear ringing are to warn the people to evacuate the city as the Martians approach," came the announcement "from a point in New York."

"All communications with Jersey closed. . . . Our Army wiped out. . . . This may be the last broadcast. . . . We'll stay to the end."

Then: "Cylinders from Mars are falling all over the country. One outside Buffalo—another in Chicago—St. Louis. . . . People are dropping like flies. . . . The poison gas spreads. . . ."

As the continent was "toppling," the real announcer explained again that the audience had been listening to a dramatization.

Panic in Northwest When Lights Fail

CONCRETE, Wash., Oct. 31.—(U.P.)—Just as an announcer was "choked off" by "poisonous gas" in what he had just said might be "the last broadcast ever made" the lights in Concrete failed.

Those who were tuned in on the program and, like thousands of others throughout the Nation, did not realize that the program was only a play, became panic-stricken.

They called friends on the telephone until all lines were clogged. They shouted from house to house. Others who had not listened to the program became alarmed.

Many prepared to "flee to the hills" in the belief the invasion already had reached clear across the continent from New York.